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Peer reviewed

**Review: Nature by Design: People, Natural Process and Ecological Restoration**  
By Eric Higgs

Reviewed by [Elery Hamilton-Smith](#)  
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Eric Higgs. *Nature by Design: People, Natural Process and Ecological Restoration*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003. 341 pp. ISBN 0-262-58226-0. US\$27.95

Right across the world, there appears to be a fashion for restoration—a sort of international atonement in recognition of all the environmental havoc that has been wrought, and is still being wrought, by the human species. Inevitably, this has spawned new professional identities, professional associations and numerous conferences. In short, we now have a whole new industry.

Higgs, while being a prophet of the new industry, has also sounded a clear and critical warning. Essentially, the scientists have taught us how to undertake nature restoration, but very few have even thought about why or to what ends we might restore a given site. It is simply assumed to be self-evidently a "good thing." Higgs has moved down the track to developing a philosophical basis for restoration practice, drawing not so much on the already involved scientific disciplines, but upon history and anthropology.

I found it especially fascinating to see how far his questioning echoes the even louder questions being raised by art historian James Beck and ArtWatch International. Restoration of paintings and even sculpture (Michelangelo's *David* is one of the current victims) has long been practiced and unquestioningly accepted. Beck attacks most restoration on the basis that it destroys the history of a work, changes its very character and prevents the natural ageing processes of the art itself. Great works of art are being tampered with to suit the vision, tastes and financial profitability of the 21st century and are being irrevocably altered.

Many readers are doubtless familiar with Schama's great *Landscape and Memory*. One only has to reflect for a moment on the history of landscapes as presented by Schama to ask about our ends in restoration—what outcomes are we seeking? It sounds very simple to say we will restore the landscape to what it was originally—but of course, every landscape is dynamic and changing. Which year in which century will we take as the baseline "original"?

Higgs is no woolly-headed idealist who would let nature take its own course into a future of dominant invasive species or of residual desert. He is a committed and doubtless very competent restorationist. But his kind of questioning provides the basis upon which we will see the development of a much more effective restoration practice. Personally, I have this eerie vision of restorationists marching into the future with Higgs in one hand and Kendle and Forbes equally challenging *Urban Nature Conservation* in the other. They also question the basis of practice but, more than Higgs, provide a bridge to the scientific basis of restoration action. Each book wonderfully complements the other.

But the true challenge lies in Higgs' work. I plan to find time shortly to take his book with me, go to one of my favourite altered landscapes, and spend a day simply reflecting upon what has been done, perhaps why it was done in just the way it was, and perhaps how it might have been done in an even more profound and effective way. I am certain I will learn a great deal. In just the same way, I want to re-think one recent project in which I succeeded in salvaging what was almost a totally destroyed landscape-but the new stabilized and sanitized scene is hardly exciting or inspiring!

Finally, this book is one further example of a principle that has informed a great deal of my lifetime of professional practice-there is nothing more practical than sound philosophy!

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